

Part III: Middle Grades Schools and Structures

Group Members

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Definition of Research Area and Terms

We defined middle school organizational structures as those components or structures of middle grades programs and schools that organize people, place, and time. Powell (2015) outlined structures of people to include student groupings (i.e., homogeneous ability grouping, heterogeneous ability grouping, multi-age grouping, looping, teaming, advisory programs). Structures of place include public middle school options (e.g., charter, magnet schools) and private options as well as shared space and proximity. Structures of time include different scheduling formats (e.g., traditional, block). Jackson & Davis (2000) also highlighted the importance of organization of people, place, and time to foster the relationships that lead to student success.

Literature Review Process

In following suit with NMSA's (1997) *A 21st Century Research Agenda*, we sought to uncover questions pertinent to middle grades education today. Our guiding questions were: (a) what are the most pressing questions about current middle grades organizational structures that foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships?; and (b) what factors and policies influencing the implementation of such structures need to be examined?

We searched the major middle grades journals, seminal databases (e.g., Ebscohost), books and

other resources published since 2000 by key terms (e.g., interdisciplinary teaming and middle school, teaming and middle school, interdisciplinary teaming and school, organizational structures and middle school, organization and middle school, common planning time, common planning time in middle school, advisory and middle school, PLC's and middle school, professional learning community and middle school, lesson study and middle school). In all cases, we added relevant works to the Google Spreadsheet, and stored a copy of the work in a Google Drive folder. Additionally, we sought the work of a middle grades education colleague who recently conducted a large scale search of literature (with structures as one of the subtopics) and went through all of the articles listed, again adding relevant works to the Google Spreadsheet, and storing a copy of the work in a Google Drive folder. We organized the Google spreadsheet into the following categories: bibliographic information, annotated summary, code based on structure (people, place, time), code based on influences (policies, factors). We also used Google Drive to save each file and stored one copy of every work that was recorded on the "yes" spreadsheet. Last, we used Google Docs to list our research questions, process, ideas for research studies, and key takeaways for the larger middle grades education research community.

After we conducted our first database search, we met to determine if this topic warranted further investigation. We gathered key statements and concepts from literature to ensure that the topic was a timely one. The search revealed that major national organizations routinely highlighted organizational structures in their criteria for assessing effective middle schools (e.g., National Forum, n.d.; National Middle School Association, 2010) and that interdisciplinary teaming was regularly identified as a defining feature of a middle school (Hackmann, Petzko, Valentine,

Clark, Nori, & Lucas, 2002; Warner, 2001). Swaim's (2009) perspective further solidified our belief that research into middle grades organizational structures remained timely:

Fifty years ago, the school was organized much differently than it is now. Maybe the system at that time was organized to fit who the students were at that time, or maybe it was just tradition. However, it made me wonder what it would have been like if the school had been organized as it is now, would today's middle school organization fit those earlier times? It also made me wonder if, in 2057, what we now consider effective middle school organization will still be the same. I came to the conclusion that the main reason it would be different would be if the needs and characteristics of young adolescents had significantly changed, because an enduring ideal that guides middle level education is that schools must be developmentally responsive to the students they serve (NMSA, 2003). (pp. 50-51)

We then used the emerging research questions to refine the spreadsheet (e.g., eliminating works no longer aligned with questions, duplications). We created a yes and no spreadsheet to list all works collected. We then identified focus areas that warrant further exploration. The group discussed the data until major themes, questions, key takeaways for the middle grades research community became apparent. Once we all agreed that we hit saturation, we discussed data until themes, questions, and key takeaways were refined.

Our final task was to identify gaps in knowledge and craft associated research questions. Utilizing the MLER SIG Common Planning Time study as a model for a large-scale study on one type of middle grades structure, we crafted a set of research questions that have the potential to guide the field for the next five years based on trends in middle grades school structures and gaps in the knowledge base. We broke our questions down by sub-topics (i.e., status of school structures, structures of people, place,

and time) to reflect our definition listed above. Structures within each sub-topic that were determined to be worthy of further investigation based on a large-scale search of literature on middle grades structures and are listed below followed by suggested research questions for each. For structures of people, interdisciplinary teaming will be explored. For structures of place, magnet and charter schools will be explored. For structures of time, traditional versus block scheduling will be explored.

Research Questions

A. Status and Vision

Status

1. What is the current status of middle grades organizational structures and what factors and policies influence the implementation of such structures?
 - a. In what ways are contemporary schools with middle grades organized (e.g., structures of people, place, time)?
 - b. How do these differ regionally?
 - c. In what ways do these structures foster or hinder
 - i. purposeful learning?
 - ii. meaningful relationships?
 - iii. student achievement?
 - d. What factors drive these organizational decisions (e.g., school leadership, district-level decisions, professional development)?
 - e. What policies drive these organizational decisions at the local, state, federal levels (e.g., accountability movement, class size reduction amendment)?

Vision

2. How should 21st century middle grades schools be organized to foster purposeful learning, meaningful relationships, and student achievement?
 - a. What organizational structures should exist in 21st century middle

- grades schools (e.g., structures of people, place, time)?
- b. What would these organizational structures look like when implemented?
 - c. What is needed to implement these organizational structures with fidelity?
 - d. In what ways might these organizational structures foster
 - i. purposeful learning?
 - ii. meaningful relationships?
 - iii. student achievement?
 - e. What factors drive these organizational decisions (e.g., school leadership, district-level decisions, professional development)?
 - f. What policies (school, district, state, federal) influence the effectiveness of these structures?

B. Interdisciplinary Teaming

Understanding and Implementation of Interdisciplinary Teaming

3. What is the intent of interdisciplinary teaming?
4. In what ways has the interdisciplinary teaming model changed over time?
5. In what ways is the implementation of interdisciplinary teaming influenced by external forces (e.g., administration, district expectations, and state requirements)?
6. In what ways does interdisciplinary teaming influence classroom practices (e.g., teaching, management)?

Teacher Candidate Preparation and Teacher Professional Development

7. What is the status of teacher candidate preparation for interdisciplinary teaming?
8. What is the status of teacher professional development for interdisciplinary teaming?
9. What preparation or development is necessary to implement interdisciplinary teaming effectively?

Benefits of Interdisciplinary Teaming

10. What are the benefits of interdisciplinary teaming for
 - a. students?
 - b. teachers?
 - c. the school community?
11. In what ways does interdisciplinary teaming foster
 - d. purposeful learning?
 - e. meaningful relationships?
 - f. student achievement?

Disadvantages of Interdisciplinary Teaming

12. What aspects of interdisciplinary teaming are difficult for
 - g. students?
 - h. teachers?
 - i. the school community?
13. In what ways does interdisciplinary teaming negatively affect
 - j. students?
 - k. teachers?
 - l. the school community?
14. In what ways does interdisciplinary teaming hinder
 - m. purposeful learning?
 - n. hinder meaningful relationships?
 - o. student achievement?
15. What factors, if any, influence the effectiveness of interdisciplinary teaming?
16. What factors, if any, lead to the reduction of fully implemented interdisciplinary teaming?
17. What policies (school, district, state, federal) negatively influence the effectiveness of interdisciplinary teaming?

Alternative Structures to Interdisciplinary Teaming

18. What alternative structures, if any, are being used in place of interdisciplinary teaming?
19. What are the benefits of these alternative structures for
 - p. students?
 - q. teachers?
 - r. the school community?
20. In what ways do these alternative structures influence

- s. classroom climate?
 - t. school climate?
21. In what ways do these structures foster or hinder
- u. purposeful learning?
 - v. meaningful relationships?
 - w. student achievement?

C. Magnet and Charter Schools

Status of Magnet and Charter Schools

22. What is the status of the magnet and charter school movements in the middle grades?
23. How do the purposes of magnet and charter middle schools compare to those of other schools with middle grades?
24. In what ways, if any, have magnet and charter schools changed over time?
25. In what ways, if any, do these structures support or hinder the middle grades movement?

Professional Preparation and Professional Development

26. How does teacher candidate preparation or teacher professional development differ for educators in magnet or charter middle schools?
27. What further preparation or development, if any, is necessary?

Benefits of Magnet and Charter Schools

28. What are the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits of magnet or charter schools for young adolescent learners?
29. What are the benefits of magnet or charter schools for teachers?
30. In what ways do magnet or charter schools foster
- a. purposeful learning?
 - b. meaningful relationships?
 - c. student achievement?
31. What factors (school, district, state, federal) have influenced the effectiveness of magnet or charter schools in positive ways?

32. What policies (school, district, state, federal) have influenced the effectiveness of magnet or charter schools in positive ways?

Disadvantages of Magnet and Charter Schools

33. What are the barriers to participation in magnet or charter schools for students?
34. What are the disadvantages of magnet or charter schools for students and teachers?
35. In what ways are students' cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth unaddressed by magnet or charter schools?
36. What factors, if any, have detracted from the effectiveness of magnet or charter schools?
37. In what ways have magnet or charter schools hindered
- a. purposeful learning?
 - b. meaningful relationships?
 - c. student achievement?
38. In what ways have magnet or charter schools affected local, state, and national education programs negatively?
39. What policies (school, district, state, federal) have influenced the effectiveness of magnet/charter schools negatively?

D. Scheduling Formats

Understanding and Implementation of Scheduling Formats

40. What scheduling formats are being used in the middle grades (e.g., traditional 6/7/8 period schedule, waterfall, rotating, long block, flexible block)?
41. What is the purpose of each scheduling format?
42. In what ways have scheduling formats changed over time?
43. In what ways are decisions about scheduling formats influenced by external demands (e.g., school administration, district expectations, state requirements?)

44. In what ways do scheduling formats influence classroom practices (e.g., teaching, exploratory classes)?

Teacher Candidate Preparation and Teacher Professional Development

45. What is the status of teacher candidate preparation on scheduling formats?
 46. What is the status of teacher professional development on scheduling formats?
 47. What further preparation or development is necessary to teach within various scheduling formats effectively?

Benefits and Outcomes of Scheduling Formats

48. What are the benefits and outcomes of various schedule formats for
 a. students?
 b. teachers?
 c. the school community?
 49. In what ways do various schedule formats foster
 a. purposeful learning?
 b. meaningful relationships?
 c. student achievement?

Perceived Barriers of Scheduling Formats

50. What aspects of various schedule formats are difficult for
 a. students?
 b. teachers?
 c. the school community?
 51. In what ways do various schedule formats hinder
 a. purposeful learning?
 b. meaningful relationships?
 c. student achievement?
 52. What policies (school, district, state, federal) influence the effectiveness of have various schedule formats?

Influential Readings

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